

## TRADITIONAL RITES AND CONTESTED MEANINGS: SECTARIAN STRIFE IN COLONIAL LUCKNOW

The truth is that in those days the whole year was spent waiting for Muharram ... After the goat sacrifices of Baqr Id the preparations for Muharram began. Dadda, my father's mother, started to softly chant elegies about the martyrs. Mother set about sewing black clothes for all of us; and my sister took out the notebooks of laments ... and began to practice them. I don't know about Lucknow – I don't even know about Ghazipur – but I certainly do know that among the Saiyid families of Gangauli, Muharram was nothing less than a spiritual celebration.

RAHI MASOOM REZA, *The Feuding Families of Village Gangauli*.  
Translated by Gillian Wright (Delhi, 1994), pp. 9-10.

1 – As darkness descended on Lucknow, once a prized city of Awadh, some people huddled together in a café or on the terraces with their eyes fixed on the distant horizon. After a long and anxious wait, the city comes alive: the moon is sighted in the middle of dark clouds hovering over the Gomti river. The deafening sound of crackers from Nakhaas and the loud and clear call for prayers from Shah Najaf mark the beginning of the holy month of Muharram. Lucknavis would observe the next ten days with solemnity. They would renew and reaffirm their unflinching devotion to those Islamic principles for which Imam Husain, grandson of the Prophet of Islam, and his seventy-two companions laid down their lives on the banks of the river Euphrates in 680 A.D. Once more they would, in their imagination, rally round those gallant men at Karbala who kept the Islamic flag flying without capitulating before the evil and tyrannical forces. They would once again desire to share in their *karb* (pain) and *bela* (trial).

Come day one of Muharram and life in Lucknow comes to a standstill. Perfume and tobacco shops wear a deserted look. Trade is no longer brisk. Business is slackened. The busy and noisy bazaars of Aminabad and Nakhaas are subdued. The city is robbed of its buoyancy, festive look and vibrant mood. Mrs. Meer Hasan Ali, an English lady married to a Shia and living in Lucknow in the 1820's, contrasted the profound stillness of an extensively populated native city with the incessant bustle usual at all other times<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> MEER HASAN ALI, *Observations on the Mussalmans of India* (London, 1982), p. 30.

The change is manifested in several different ways. Women, including the newly-wed, remove their jewellery, their bangles and flashy clothes; «the hair is unloosed ... and allowed to flow in disorder about the person; the coloured pyjamaahs (loose trousers) and deputtahs (long scarf) are removed, with every other articles of their usual costume, for a suit that, with them, constitutes mourning – some choose black, others grey, slate, or green»<sup>2</sup>. Comforts, luxury or convenience is set aside. The *pallung*, the *charpoy* (the two descriptions of beds) and the *musnad* are removed. Instead, women of all classes use a date mat or simply sleep on a matted floor<sup>3</sup>. Men are equally abstemious, sporting white *angarkhas* (a combination of the *jama*, a collarless shirt and *balabar*) or *achkans* (the knee-length tunics) in dark shades. Poets, accustomed to regaling large audiences with *ghazals*, switch to writing *marthiyas* (elegies) and *soz* (dirges). Their chief patrons, the rajas and nawabs, abandon their favourite pastimes to lead a pious and abstemious life. Their palaces, havelis and forts bear a sombre look during Muharram.

Courtesans and their retinue in Chowk put away their musical instruments, their *ghungrus*, *payals*, and the *tabla* (a musical instrument). Umrao Jan Ada's *Khanum* commemorated Husain's martyrdom on a more elaborate scale than any other courtesan in Lucknow, decorating the place of mourning with banners, buntings, chandeliers, globes. Umrao Jan was herself an accomplished *sozkhwan* (reciter of dirges). The most celebrated professionals dare not perform in her presence<sup>4</sup>. Her account finds resonances in Attia Hosain's description of her visit down «the forbidden street whose balconies during the first days of Muharram were empty of painted, bejewelled women when visitors climbed the narrow stairs only to hear religious songs of mourning»<sup>5</sup>. There was the glass *ta'zia*, the miniature domed tomb, shining, gleaming, reflecting the light of many crystal lamps.

The city's black-clad men and women set aside their daily chores to sorrow for the martyred Imam. They marched through the lanes and by-lanes of Lucknow in fervent lamentation chanting 'Ya-Husain', 'Ya-Husain', rhythmically beating their chest, self flagellating, carrying replicas (*ta'zia*) of Husain's tomb, his coffin (*taboot*), his standards and insignia (*'alam*) and (*panja*) and his horse (*dul-dul*). One of the most impressive religious spectacles, commented William Crooke, was the long procession of *ta'zias* and flags streaming along the streets with a vast crowd of mourners, who «scream out their lamentations and beat their breasts till the blood flows, or they sink fainting in an ecstasy of sorrow»<sup>6</sup>. Notice, too, the following description:

<sup>2</sup> IBID., p. 46.

<sup>3</sup> IBID., p. 43.

<sup>4</sup> ATTIA HOSAIN, *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (Delhi: Penguin Books, 1992), p. 64.

<sup>5</sup> MIRZA MOHAMMAD HADI RUSWA, *Umrao Jan Ada*. Translated by Khushwant Singh and M.A. Husain (Hyderabad, 1982), p. 48.

<sup>6</sup> W. CROOKE. *The North-Western Provinces of India: their History, Ethnology, and Administration* (Delhi, 1975 reprint), p. 263.

The sun was high above the church steeple when we heard the distant chanting. «Hasan! Husain! Hasan! Husain! Haider!». It came nearer and the measured sound of bare hands striking bare breasts, the monotonous beat of drums and cymbals made my heart beat with a strange excitement. Then the barefooted, bareheaded men came in view following the *ta'zias* carried shoulder-high. There were *ta'zias* of peacock's feathers, of glass, of sugar, of bright-coloured paper, intricate, beautiful, arched, domed, some as high as telegraph poles, others from poor homes so small that they could be held on one man's head, all hurrying to join the main procession at the allotted time, for burial or consecration<sup>7</sup>.

Such demonstrative acts in public were just a small part of Muharram ceremonies. The *imambaras* (literally, the house of Imam), many of which were symbolic of Lucknow's Shia past and present, were nerve centres of Muharram observances. They served as central organising spaces as well as physical statements uniting the populace of the city<sup>8</sup>. They also served as symbols of communitarian solidarity and as platforms for articulating individual and collective experiences. Here the gatherings (*majlis*) were structured, adhering to a pattern laid down by the Shia Nawabs of Awadh. Beginning with *soz-khwani* (recitation without the aid of musical instruments), a *majlis* would be followed by either a sermon or *marthiya-khwani* (reading of elegy), a style of rendering inspired by the legendary Lucknow poet, Mir Anis (1802-1875). It would normally conclude with the rendering of short dirges. (As soon as the impressive and heartrendering notes of dirges were chanted by Mir Ali Hasan and Mir Bandey Hasan», wrote the essayist-novelist Abdul Halim Sharar (1860-1926), «hundreds of men from elist families began to sing them, and then the women of noble Shia families also intoned them with their matchless voices ... Matters have now reached the stage that during Muharram and on most days of mourning, heartrending sounds of lamentation and the melodious chanting of dirges can be heard from every house in every lane in old Lucknow. In every alley one will hear beautiful voices and melodies which one will never forget»<sup>9</sup>.

The sermon is at the heart of Muharram rites. It is, in large part, an elegiac account of the episodes in the Karbala story, a moving narrative of the pain, anguish and agony of Husain and his companions. Year after year, speakers detail the same sequence of events, retaining the order in which members of Husain's family were killed. This is done to correlate the chain of events traditionally

<sup>7</sup> ATTIA HOSAIN, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

<sup>8</sup> J.R.I. COLE, *Roots of North Indian Shi'ism in Iran and Iraq: Religion and State in Awadh 1772-1859* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1988), p. 98, and Sandria Freitag, *Collective Action and Community: Public Arenas and the Emergence of Communalism in North India* (Delhi, 1990), p. 237.

<sup>9</sup> A.H. SHARAR, *Lucknow: The Last Phase of an Oriental Culture*. Translated and edited by E.S. Harcourt and Fakhir Hussain (London, 1975), p. 149.

recorded with the leading martyrs. The commemorations are fashioned accordingly. Thus the sixth of Muharram is connected with Husain's young nephew, the seventh with his eighteen-year old son, the eighth with the brave and loyal brother 'Abbas, the ninth with the six-month old son Ali Asghar and the tenth with Imam Husain's own martyrdom. Qasim, Ali Akbar, Abbas, Ali Asghar and Husain himself exemplified the enormity of the tragedy; so that days linked with their martyrdom convey deep meanings, special attachments and associations. Their sufferings, narrated by the man on the pulpit, move audiences (*azadars*) to mourn, wail and lament, beat their chests (*matam*) and participate in the sufferings of the martyrs by self-deprivation and mortification. The following account captures the mood in Lucknow:

It was the ninth night of Muharram. On the horizon there was a glow as of a forgetful sun rising before moonset. The glow of a million lamps from the illuminated Imambaras where *ta'zias* and banners were laid to rest, lit the sky, and the city was alive crowds forgetful in that bright beauty of the month of mourning ... When he (Asad) read of the agonies of thirst of the children of the Prophet, cut off from the river by their enemies, the women sobbed softly. Ustaniji began beating her breast, saying «Hasan, Husain» softly, with a slow rhythm. Ramzano stared at her strangely and joined in. The others still sobbed softly<sup>10</sup>.

Ten days of mourning ceremonies culminate on the tenth day (*yaum-i 'ashura*) with the *Majlis-i Sham-i Ghariban* at the famous Ghufaramab *imambara*, the final mournful tribute to the *Sayyid ash-Shuhada'* (Lord of the Martyrs). The final curtain is drawn on Chehlum, the fortieth day. Sharar described his visit to the Talkatora Karbala in Lucknow on that day. He witnessed a procession of women approaching carrying *ta'zias*. All were bare-headed and their hair hung loose. In the centre a woman carried a candle. By its light a beautiful, delicately formed girl read from some sheets of paper. She chanted a dirge along with other women. He was moved by the «stillness, the moonlight, those bare-headed beauties and the soul-rending notes of their sad melody». As the group passed through the gates of the shrine, he heard the following lament:

When the caravan of Medina, having lost all  
Arrived in captivity in the vicinity of Sham  
Foremost came the head of Husain, borne aloft on a spear  
And in its wake, a band of women, with heads bared<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>10</sup> ATTIA HOSAIN, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

<sup>11</sup> SHARAR, *op. cit.*, pp. 149-50.

2 – Muharram, Husain and Karbala signified different things to different sections of Lucknow society. Some saw in the observances an obvious potential as a rhetorical instrument of political mobilisation. The Khilafat leadership in India could therefore employ the paradigm of Karbala and harness the most evocative themes of Shiism to provide depth to their movement<sup>12</sup>. At another level, Husain's martyrdom served, to the Shias of all times and in all places, as an everlasting exhortation to guard their separate identity and to brave their numerical inferiority in the face of firmly established and sometimes oppressive majorities. It made sense, according to Hamid Enayat, on two other levels first, in terms of a soteriology not dissimilar from the one invoked in the case of Christ's crucifixion: just as Christ sacrificed himself on the altar of the cross to redeem humanity, so did Husain allow himself to be killed on the plains of Karbala to purify the Muslim community of sins; and second, as an active factor vindicating the Shia cause, contributing to its ultimate triumph. When one adds to all this the cathartic effect of weeping as a means of releasing pent-up grief over not only personal misfortunes, but also the agonies of a long-suffering minority, then the reasons for the popular appeal of Muharram ceremonies become apparent<sup>13</sup>.

Husain stirred the passions and sensitivities of several groups in India. On the night of ninth Muharram, groups of women, mostly Hindus, moved about the villages reciting *dobas*, mostly improvised lyrics on the epic tragedy, and wailed in a plaintive voice. Both in urban and rural areas, most Hindus venerated Husain and incorporated his cult into their ritual calendar as yet one more divinity in the pantheon<sup>14</sup>. They offered flowers and sweets at local «Karbala's», participated in processions, decorated and kept *ta'zias* and sought Husain's intercession to cure the diseased, avert calamities procure children for the childless or improve the circumstances of the dead. The Imam's trial and tribulations inspired faith in a universal nemesis ensuring justice for oppressed souls. He was, so was the popular belief, the Ram of Ayodhya carrying on his crusade in wilderness; his brother Abbas personified Lakshman, devoted, energetic and brave; his sister Zainab and wife Um-i Kulthum were cast in the image of Sita, caring, dutiful and spirited. Yazid the Umayyad ruler and Husain's persecutor, was akin to Ravan of Lanka, greedy, corrupt, ambitious, cruel and ruthless.

W.H. Sleeman found Hindu princes in central and southern India, «even of the brahmin caste», commemorating Muharram; «in no part of India, are these illuminations and processions more brilliant and costly». In Gwalior, a Hindu State, Muharram was observed with splendid pomp. So also in Baroda, where the ruler sent an exquisite prayer carpet of pearls to Mecca<sup>15</sup>. Travellers discovered

<sup>12</sup> See MUSHIRUL HASAN, *Nationalism and Communal Politics in India, 1885-1930* (Delhi, 1991).

<sup>13</sup> HAMID ENAYAT, *Modern Islamic Political Thought* (London, 1982), p. 20.

<sup>14</sup> COLE *op. cit.*, pp. 116-7.

<sup>15</sup> P.D. REEVES (ed.), *Sleeman in Oudh: An Abridgement of W.H. Sleeman's Journey Through the Kingdom of Oude in 1849-50* (Cambridge, 1971), pp. 158-9; WALTER ROPER LAWRENCE, *The India We*

Hindus clothing themselves in green garments and assuming the guise of *faqirs*<sup>16</sup>. So did Ja'far Sharif<sup>17</sup>. A Hindi newspaper reported in July 1895 that Muharram passed off peace fully in Banaras. «When it is Hindus who mostly celebrate (*sic*) this festival, what fear can there be?»<sup>18</sup>. The Muharram fervour also gripped most sections of Lucknow society, including «thousands of Hindus» who chanted *nobas* along with the Shias and Sunnis<sup>19</sup>. Shiva Prasad kept a *ta'zia* in a specially prepared shed. On the tenth day of the month, the elaborate man-high tomb made of bright-coloured paper and tinsel was carried to its burial in procession. The Muslim servants recited dirges, while Shiva Prasad he and his sons followed in barefooted, bare-headed respect.<sup>20</sup>

This was not all. Munshi Faizuddin's reminiscences, published in 1885, described Muharram rites in the court of the last two Mughal Emperors<sup>21</sup>. So does Syed Ahmad Dehlawi's (b. 1946) in *Rusum-i Dehli* (Rituals and Traditions of Delhi), written some decades later<sup>22</sup>. The Sunni raja of Nanpara kept Shia '*ulama*' at his provincial seat to read elegies for Husain<sup>23</sup>. In Allahabad, Sunnis took out 122 of the 220 *ta'zias*<sup>24</sup>. It was the same in most other parts of northern India. Rural Muslims, Crooke declared in 1897, joined in the Muharram observances «almost without distinction of sect»<sup>25</sup>. A western scholar of Indian Islam was struck by the fact that Shia influences penetrated «the length and breadth of the Sunni community»<sup>26</sup>. In a small north Indian princely state, a British civil servant found that every Muslim guild – the painters, the masons, the carpenters, the weaver – had their own *ta'zias* and their own troupes of actors and mourners who reproduced scenes of the struggle at Karbala<sup>27</sup>. Here and elsewhere, Shia-Sunni relations were not structured around sectarian lines. Some people nursed sectarian prejudices, but most consciously resisted attempts to create fissures in the broadly unified and consensual model of social and cultural living. Regardless

*Served* (London, 1928), pp. 292-3; BAMPFYLDE FULLER, *Studies on Indian Life and Sentiment* (London, 1910), pp. 125-6; W.S. BLUNT, *India Under Ripon: A Private Diary* (London, 1909), p. 72.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in FRIETAG, *op. cit.*, p. 259.

<sup>17</sup> JAFFUR SHURREEF, *Qanoon-e-Islam*. Translated by G.A. Herklots (Madras 1863), p. 123; see also OMAR KHALIDI, «The Shias of the Deccan: An Introduction», in *Hamdard Islamicus*, vol. 15, no. 4 1998.

<sup>18</sup> NITA KUMAR *The Artisans of Banaras: Popular Culture and Identity 1880-1986* (Princeton New Jersey, 1988), p. 216.

<sup>19</sup> SHARAR, *op. cit.*, p. 149.

<sup>20</sup> ATTIA HOSAIN, *Phoenix Fled* (Ruper Paperbacks, 1993), p. 176.

<sup>21</sup> MUNSHI FAIZUDDIN, *Bazm-i Akhbir* (Delhi: Urdu Academy, 1986), pp. 63-66.

<sup>22</sup> SAIYID AHMAD DEHLAWI, *Rusum-i Dilhi*, (Delhi: Urdu Academy, 1986), pp. 178-80.

<sup>23</sup> COLE, *op. cit.*, p. 105.

<sup>24</sup> C.A. BAYLY, *The Local Roots of Indian Politics-Allahabad, 1880-1920* (Oxford, 1975), p. 81; For Bilgram, see Syed Athar Raza Bilgrami, 'Bilgram ki Azadaari', in *Islam aur Asr-i Jadid* (Delhi), vol. 25, no. 2, April 1993. For a brilliant description, see RAHI MASOOM REZA, *The Feuding Families of Gangauli*. Translated from the Hindi by Gillian Wright. (Delhi, 1994).

<sup>25</sup> CROOKE, *op. cit.*, p. 263.

<sup>26</sup> MURRAY T. TITUS, *Indian Islam* (Oxford, 1930).

<sup>27</sup> PENDEREL MOON, *Strangers in India* (London, 1943), pp. 86-7.



of the polemics of the '*ulama*' and the itinerant preachers, bonds of friendship and understanding remained intact because Shias and Sunnis of all classes shared a language, literature and a cultural heritage. That is probably why Sharar observed, though in an exaggerated vein, that no one in Lucknow ever noticed who was a Sunni and who a Shia<sup>28</sup>.

Lucknow was, both before and during Nawabi rule, relatively free of religious insularity or sectarian bigotry. The Shia Nawabs took their cue from their Sunni overlords in Delhi and created a broad-based polity and a cosmopolitan cultural and intellectual ethos. They adhered to the policy of *sulh-i kul* (peace with all), pioneered by the sixteenth century Mughal Emperor, Jalaluddin Mohammad Akbar. Wajid Ali Shah is reported to have said that «of my two eyes, one is a Shia and the other is a Sunni». No wonder, Sunni officials occupied important positions in the middle and lower echelons of government departments. The highest officials in Wajid Ali Shah's court, including the Vazir and Paymaster, were Sunnis. Sunni officers managed the Sibtainabad *imambara* and the *Baitul boka* (House of Lamentation)<sup>29</sup>. Generally speaking, the Shiism of Awadh rulers provided both a liminal cultural glue and a set of structural lines of schism along which conflict could be routed<sup>30</sup>.

Shia-Sunni controversies did not plague most rulers of princely States or the Awadh taluqdars. Several Shia families from Awadh, such as the Syeds of Bilgram, sought and secured lucrative positions in Hyderabad. Shia-Sunni marriages were commonly contracted in princely States such as Rampur, as also is taluqdar families. Shias and Sunnis forged a common front in literary and political associations. They acted in unison during the Urdu agitation against the April 1900 Nagri resolution of the government in the United Provinces. They shared the Muslim League platform. They were one in agitating over the Kanpur mosque. They made common cause on the Aligarh Muslim University issue. They combined, much to everybody's surprise, on the Khilafat question. The Raja of Mahmudabad (1879-1931), a devout Shia, kept these causes alive. He patronised the «Young Party», funded the newspapers and their agitations. James Meston (1865-1943) lieutenant-governor of the United Provinces, reported how «clique of noisy and aggressive Muslims of the young party» made the Raja's house their headquarters and lived and agitated at his expense<sup>31</sup>.

Urdu prose and poetry, too, offers no clue to polarise Shia-Sunni sentiments. The writings of Syed Ahmad Khan (1817-1898), Altaf Husain Hali (1837-1914), Shibli Nomani (1857-1914), Maulvi Zakaullah (1832-1910), Maulvi Nazir Ahmad

<sup>28</sup> SHARAR, *op. cit.*, pp. 74-5.

<sup>29</sup> IBID. This is not to suggest that the Awadh rulers did not express their solidarity with the Shias or that the Shias were not given preference in appointments. See MICHAEL H. FISHER, *A Clash of Cultures: Awadh, The British, and the Mughals* (Delhi, 1987), pp. 65-66.

<sup>30</sup> FRIETAG, *op. cit.*, p. 250

<sup>31</sup> Meston to Chelmsford, 20 August 1917, Meston Papers (1), IOLR.

(1836-1912) and Abdul Halim Sharar were free of sectarian claptrap. In 1889 Sharar wrote *Hasan aur Anjalina*; Shia-Sunni relations was its theme. The Shia-Sunni category was alien to the great Urdu poet Asadullah Khan Ghalib (1797-1869). He wore no sectarian badge, no sectarian colour. He claimed to be «a pure Unitarian and a true believer». So he was. He was suspected by some to be a Shia and by others as a *tafazili* (one who, though a Shia, acknowledges the pre-eminence of Ali). Ghalib himself revelled in this ambivalence. In the final tribute to the man's religious transcendence, there was some confusion as to whether his funeral rites should follow Shia or Sunni rituals.

Dakhni and modern Urdu poetry were both rich in *manqabat*, poems in praise of Ali, and in *marthiyas*, authored by both Shias and Sunnis. Husain is everybody's hero the embodiment of Islamic virtues of piety, courage and commitment. He laid down his life but did not compromise with a bloody-minded tyrant presiding over a degenerate political and social order. His exemplary courage inspired Mohamed Ali (1878-1931), the volatile "Khilafat" leader. He believed that Yazid won on the bank of Euphrates, but Husain «reigned and still reigns over the hearts of a faith of God's human creation, while the soul of humankind in its entirety applauds the victory and final triumph of the victims of Karbala and shall continue to do so...»<sup>32</sup>.

*Qatl-i Husain asl me marg-i Yazid hai*  
*Islam zinda hota hai har Karbala ke baad*

Husain's assassination, in reality, symbolizes the death of Yazid.  
Islam is, after all, rejuvenated with such tragedies.

Mohammad Iqbal (1876-1938) echoed similar sentiments: «Strange and simple and colourful is the story of Kaaba; its end is Husain, its beginning Ismail». Husain was a model of the Perfect Man who becomes a martyr in his strife for God's unity against the rulers of the world. Every age brings forth a new Yazid, but resistance to tyranny, as evident from Husain's legendary example, is incumbent upon every believer<sup>33</sup>. Employing the paradigm of Husain and Karbala, Iqbal sent forth the message:

*Nikal kar khanqahon se ada kar rasm-i Shabbiri*

Emerge from the confines of the khanqahs and,  
Re-enact the example set by Husain.

<sup>32</sup> Mohamed Ali to A.A. Bukhari, 19 November 1916, in MUSHIRUL HASAN (ed.), *Mohamed Ali in Indian Politics: Select Writings 1906-1916*, vol. 1 (Delhi, 1985), p. 301.

<sup>33</sup> Quoted in A. SCHIMMEL, *Gabriel's Wing: A Study into the Religious Ideas of Sir Muhammad Iqbal* (Leiden, 1963), p. 167.



All of this underlined the importance of Husain, Muharram and Karbala as living and vibrant symbols of India's composite cultural interaction, the inter-mixing of religio-cultural strands and the fusion of religious beliefs and practices. Yet by the end of the nineteenth-century, such representations of unity were gradually transformed into symbols of discord. They served, in the hands of the politician-priest combine, to heighten sectarian consciousness, assert judicial and political rights and widen areas of competition and disharmony. Each side came to nurse profound grievances about the other based on mutually exclusive interpretations of history.

The first ominous sign surfaced around 1906 when some Sunni zealots constructed their own local Karbala at Phoolkatora on the north-eastern edge of Lucknow, opposite the existing Karbala in Talkatora. The fires of sectarian unrest were then stoked by the *public* praise (*Madh-e Sababa*) of the three khalifas – Abu Bakr, Umar and Uthman. The Shias were not amused. They regarded them as «usurpers» of Ali's claim as the Prophet's successor. They retaliated with a villification (*tabarro'*) campaign. Sunni preachers went a step further. Muharram observances were declared as acts of *bid'at* (heresy). People were exhorted to avoid them scrupulously<sup>34</sup>; Zafarul Mulk, secretary of the Lucknow *Madh-e Sababa* committee, struck a sharp note by declaring *ta'ziadaari* as «deleterious to the spiritual and temporal well-being of the Muslims»<sup>35</sup>. The nature of the Shia-Sunni engagement inevitably led to the appropriation of certain symbols and the rejection of others.

The writing on the wall was clear. Muharram was no longer a common symbol of veneration but an exclusively Shia concern in its format as well as in the composition of the participants<sup>36</sup>. By the 1930s, its popular appeal had considerably diminished, though less so in the rural hinterland<sup>37</sup>. A powerful symbol of unity turned into a potent vehicle for sectarian mobilisation. As a result, sectarian strife was a much more common occurrence in north Indian towns than Hindu-Muslim riots. Shia-Sunni disturbances were sparked off in Lucknow in the 1880s and 1890s and in 1907-8. The feeling of tension between the Sunnis and Shias of Lucknow has reached its climax, reported the *Gauhar-i Shahwar* in April 1907<sup>38</sup>. Allahabad, Banaras, and Jaunpur witnessed widespread violence. What began with small-scale skirmishes in the last quarter of the

<sup>34</sup> Selections from Native Newspaper Reports, UP (hereafter SNMR), for the week ending 19 December 1936 and 20 March 1937.

<sup>35</sup> ZAFARUL MULK, *Shia-Sunni Dispute: Its Causes and Cure* (Servants of Islam Society Publication no. 3, n.d.), p. 1.

<sup>36</sup> The process was not confined to Lucknow. For Bombay, see Jim Masselos, 'Change and Custom in the Format of the Bombay Muharram during the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries', *South Asia* (Australia), December 1982, p. 61; and for Banaras, see NITA KUMAR, *op. cit.*, p. 216.

<sup>37</sup> C. KHALIQUZZAMAN, *Pathway to Pakistan* (Lahore, 1961), p. 149. Referring to the Bakhshu's *ta'zia* procession in Lucknow, Sharar commented: «Nowadays, because of the quarrels between Shias and Sunnis, this procession lost its original form». SHARAR, *op. cit.*, p. 151.

<sup>38</sup> April 1907, SNMR, UP, 1907.

nineteenth-century, many of which went unnoticed in official despatches because of their listing in the category of «Native Societies and Religious and Social Matters» in the *Selections from the Native Newspapers*, escalated into bloody feuds involving scores of people and turning Lucknow and its adjoining districts into a cauldron of sectarian animus.

The lines of cleavage were sharply demarcated by the mushroom growth of sectarian organisations, such as the *Anjuman-i Sadrus-Sudur*, floated by Maulana Syed Agha Husain in 1901, and the *Anjuman-i Jafariya*, established by the Syed of Barha four years later. A Shia Conference was set up in October-December 1907, some months after the Muslim League came into being. There was much talk of «Shias of light» leading the way mitigating the economic and educational backwardness of their brethren and bringing it to the level of the Parsis. Some were keen to place their grievances at the feet of the British viceroy<sup>39</sup>.

The depth of sectarian feelings was apparent at the first Shia Conference. Delegates delivered fiery and intemperate speeches against the Sunnis. The atmosphere was so vitiated that Ghulam us-Saqlain (1870-1915), editor of *Asr-i Jadid*, left the meeting in disgust. The hardliners had a field day. They set the agenda, seized the initiative in renaming the organisation as the 'Shia Political Conference', petitioned government in December 1909 to enumerate the Shia population separately in the census, and insisted on Shias separate and distinct identity<sup>40</sup>. The conference, initially formed to foster cultural and educational goals, turned into a platform for articulating sectional political aims.

In the mid-1930s the Shia Political Conference, now under the firm control of Syed Wazir Hasan (1874-1947), the architect of the Congress-League scheme of December 1916, rallied round the Congress and supported the Muslim Mass Contact campaign, Jawaharlal Nehru's brainchild. At the same time, it continued to clamour for separate representation in the legislative councils, a demand spurred by the defeat of two Shia candidates in the 1937 elections. The *Sarfaraz*, a Shia weekly from Lucknow, attributed their defeat to the «venomous» Sunni propaganda and called for safeguarding the Shia «national and political rights»<sup>41</sup>. The *Anjuman-i Tanzim ul-Muminin* had no faith in the Muslim League, a body controlled by the «Sunni Junta». So did Syed Ali of the Shia Student's Conference. The *Majlis-i Ulama*, held at Lucknow on 5 July 1945, reiterated the memorandum sent by Hosseinbhoj A. Lalljee to Wavell as well as the Congress High Command. The Shia Federation threatened to organise strikes, boycott and demonstrations if its demands were not fulfilled<sup>42</sup>.

<sup>39</sup> *Surma-i Rozqar*, 1 February 1907, *ibid*.

<sup>40</sup> *Asr-i Jadid* (Meerut), October-December 1907.

<sup>41</sup> *Sarfaraz*, 6, 7, 13 May 1939.

<sup>42</sup> Syed Ali to Jawaharlal Nehru, 6 December 1945, Jawaharlal Nehru Papers, vol. 4, Nehru Memorial Museum & Library, New Delhi; Hosseinbhoj Lalljee's Cablegram to Wavell, 6 April 1945, in *Shia Muslim's Case* (Bombay: Jawahar Press n.d.), pp. 1-2, 6-96; L/P & J/8, 693; Transfer of Power Papers, L/P&J/, 10/64. IOLR.

These were empty threats. The Congress was not prepared to complicate the scenario by introducing the 'Shia case' in negotiating with the British and the League. Likewise, the government did not recognise the Shias as a major political force. «We cannot give them special help» was how an official reacted. «We cannot contemplate», commented a senior member in the Home Department, «treating a religious sub-division of Muslims as a new minority». No wonder, the future editors of the *Transfer of Power* documents ignored Shia petitions in their compilation. «Not wanted: I don't think we need bother at all with those cables from the Shias»<sup>43</sup>.

3 – Lucknow was the scene of violent Shia-Sunni riots in 1938-39. These were a sequel to a protest movement, launched in May 1935 against an official suggestion to forbid *Madh-e Sahaba* on certain days<sup>44</sup>. The agitation gained intensity a year later. It turned violent in May-June 1937, when frenzied mobs in Lucknow and Ghazipur went on a rampage. Trouble in Ghazipur was instigated by a party of Sunnis from Jaunpur. Enraged mobs burnt and looted property. They killed at will. The summer of discontent rumbled on as sectarian strife, hitherto dormant, turned into a common occurrence in the daily lives of Lucknowis<sup>45</sup>.

There was more trouble during the next two years, fuelled by a government-appointed committee's ruling against *Madh-e Sahaba* in Lucknow<sup>46</sup>. All hell broke loose. Husain Ahmad Madani (1879-1957), principal of the renowned seminary at Deoband along with other *Jam'iyat al-'Ulama'* leaders, jumped into the fray. He advocated civil disobedience. Thousands paid heed to his call and courted arrest. Though a fervent advocate of secular nationalism and a principled critic of the «two-nation theory», he stirred sectarian passions unabashedly. He spoke at a public meeting in Lucknow on 17 March 1938 sharing the platform with the firebrand head of the Dar al-Muballighin, Maulvi 'Abdul Shakoor, and Maulana Zafarul Mulk, chief exponent of *Madh-e Sahaba* in Lucknow<sup>47</sup>. In other places, the Ahrars and the Khaksars developed common

<sup>43</sup> 18 February, 16 December 1946, 16 December 1974, *ibid.*, L/P7/J, 10, 64.

<sup>44</sup> Note by the Intelligence Department on the Shia-Sunni controversy in Lucknow, Home Political Department, file no. 75/6, National Archives of India (NAI).

<sup>45</sup> Shia-Sunni riots broke out in May-June 1937. The provincial government believed that they were provoked by the Shias to indicate that any change introduced in their past practices would be resisted. See Harry Haig to Linlithgow, 7 June and 4 July, 1937, 2-4 June 1938, 10 and 23 October 1939, L/PJ/5/264-266.

<sup>46</sup> The government appointed the Piggot Committee in 1907 to regulate Muharram observances. This was followed by the Justice Allsop Committee recommendations of 15 June 1937. The High Court Judge endorsed the Piggot Committee's report on *Madhe Sababa*. Government Gazette of the UP, Extraordinary, 28 March 1938, L/P / file no. 265, pp. 139-150. IOLR.

<sup>47</sup> G.M. Harper to Jasbir Singh, 18 March 1939, General Administration Department (GAD), file no. 65, box, no 607, Uttar Pradesh State Archives, Lucknow. Harry Haig reported that Madani insisted that the Sunnis should be allowed to assert their right to recite *Madh-e Sahaba*. To Linlithgow, 23 October 1939, L/PJ/5/266.

cause with the *Jam'iyat al-'Ulama'*. The mercurial Khaksar leader, Allama Mashriqi, mobilised his followers from different places, though police vigilance made sure that not many sneaked into the city's municipal limits<sup>48</sup>. The Ahrars, fresh from their successful agitation against the Maharaja of Kashmir, organised bands of volunteers (*jathas*) in Lucknow. They came from neighbouring Malihabad, Kanpur, Delhi, Meerut and from as far as Peshawar. By the end of March 1939, hundreds were arrested. Tension in the city, wrote Lucknow's deputy-commissioner has increased and is now nearing breaking point<sup>49</sup>.

On 30 March the Congress ministry bowed to such pressures and allowed *Madh-e Sahaba* on *Barawafat* the Prophet's birthday. The Sunnis leaders promptly called off civil disobedience and organised a 30,000 strong *Barawafat* procession to register their victory. The Shias were grief-stricken. The new order, besides contravening established conventions in Lucknow, jolted their confidence in the Congress ministry. The *Sarfaraz* chided Pant and his ministerial colleagues for its capitulation<sup>50</sup>. The impression gained credence that the Congress had played a «double game», sowed the seeds of Shia-Sunni dissension, stoked the fires of sectarian unrest to destroy the imaginary monolith structure of «Muslim Politics» and weaken the Muslim League's claim to be the sole spokesman of the Muslim community. It was not unusual for politicians to do so. Christopher Bayly's study of an earlier period has shown how the Muslim leadership in Allahabad, poorly integrated into both the formal and informal systems of power, became an object of attention for political orators to exploit sectarian fissures<sup>51</sup>.

The Shia's responded angrily to the ministerial decree of 30 March. A large crowd assembled a day after at the imposing Asad ud-daula *imambara*, indulged in *tabarro'*, and excitedly climbed the upper stories of the gateway. Some rushed towards the nearby Tila mosque, though the police blocked their onward march. Pandemonium prevailed; others set fire to nearby shops. A free exchange of brickbats ensued with people waving weapons they had acquired from the *shamianas* and palisades. The police opened fire dispersed the mob and imposed curfew<sup>52</sup>. The scholar S. Khuda Bukhsh (b. 1842) was anguished to see a posse of police with glistening bayonets in Lucknow. «Well might we heave a deep sigh at a sight such as this? Has time turned its (Islamic) precepts of brotherly love and fraternal unity into sad, mocking derision? These were the mournful thoughts as my carriage glided down the road». He was sorry that

the fabric of Islam is torn by dissensions, fierce and bitter; and that nobody was trying to restore peace, concord and harmony among

<sup>48</sup> Haig to Linlithgow, 6 September 1939, L/P&J/5/26.

<sup>49</sup> Jashir Singh to Harper, 24 March 1939, *op. cit.*

<sup>50</sup> *Sarfaraz*, 30 March 1939.

<sup>51</sup> BAYLY, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

<sup>52</sup> Harper to chief secretary, 16 March 1939, GAD, file no. 65 box no. 607.

Muslims. What a noble sight it is to see the police officers interfere at Muharram between the followers of the Prophet to prevent a breach of peace<sup>53</sup>.

Harry Haig, lieutenant-governor of the United Provinces, felt that sanctioning *Madh-e Sababa* set up among Shias conditions of intense emotional hysteria and stiffened their resolve to indulge in *tabarro'*<sup>54</sup>. He was right. Shias assembled each day at the Asafi *imambara*, recited *tabarro'* on the Husainabad Road and then courted arrest chanting «Ya Ali», «Ya Ali». Tension mounted each day. «No one knows», wrote an exasperated official in March 1939, «from hour to hour – let alone from day to day – what will happen next»<sup>55</sup>.

There were other outward signs of protest. The Shia *mujtahid*, Maulana Nasir Husain, threatened to court arrest. So did the wife of Wazir Hasan, member of an influential family, and their son Syed Ali Zahir<sup>56</sup>. Trouble spread to other areas as well. In early April, volunteers from Agra, Kanpur, Fyzabad Barabanki and Rampur sneaked into Lucknow to assist their beleaguered brethren. Plans were set afoot in Rae Bareilly to congregate in Lucknow on *Barawafat* and participate in the planned *tabarro'* agitation<sup>57</sup>. A batch of *burqa*-clad women from Rae Bareilly turned up at Kazimain, a predominantly Shia locality, to court arrest. The Shia *mujtahid* did not allow them to do so<sup>58</sup>. In August, Shias of Kanpur observed hartal against police firing in Lucknow. They wore badges on their arms and black flags fluttered on their houses. Riots also broke out in Banaras<sup>59</sup>. The impasse was complete. A report published in August 1941 suggested that the «attempt to find a solution of the Shia-Sunni dispute in Lucknow appears to have been abandoned»<sup>60</sup>.

Jawaharlal Nehru, who spent time in Lucknow to resolve the Shia-Sunni deadlock, felt that his colleagues dealt with the Shia-Sunni dispute tactlessly. «I fear there has been much bungling about this issue», he wrote to Maulana Abul Kalam Azad (1888-1958) who was not consulted before the ministry executed *volte face*. The matter was decided, he told the Maulana, «without full

<sup>53</sup> *Essays Indian and Islamic* (London, 1912), pp. 215, 273-4.

<sup>54</sup> Haig to Linlithgow, 18 April 1939. Linlithgow Papers, microfilm, Nehru Memorial Museum & Library, New Delhi.

<sup>55</sup> Jasbir Singh to G.M. Harper, 13 March 1939, *op. cit.*

<sup>56</sup> Wazir Hasan's wife was chairman of the All-India Shia Women's Association.

<sup>57</sup> Harper to chief secretary, 16 March 1939, *op. cit.*

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> *Pioneer*, 24 August 1939. Kanpur's superintendent of police reported the outbreak of a Shia-Sunni riot and the impending threat of the Ahrars to take out a *Madh-e Sababa* procession defying government orders. 10 June 1939, Diaries, Harold Charles Mitchell Papers, IOLR. For Banaras, see Charles Allen (ed.), *Plain Tales from the Raj* (London, 1981), pp. 246-7.

<sup>60</sup> L/P&J/5/272. See also, fortnightly report, 2nd half of March 1940, L/P&J/5/270. In 1943, the Sunnis in Lucknow tried to revive the *Madh-e Sababa* agitation and defy the ban on *Barawafat* procession which fell about the middle of March. This led to the extermination of some Sunni leaders from Lucknow. Fortnightly report, 2nd half of January 1943, L/PJ/5/272.

consideration of the consequences»<sup>61</sup>. Rajendra Prasad, closely associated with some leading Shias of Bihar, was equally wary of the consequences. He observed:

I presume the Shias will continue civil disobedience and will be courting jail.... It must be very distressing to put nine thousand people in jail who are apparently not opposed to the Government and many amongst whom are widely respected for one reason or the other. What troubles me even more is the propaganda which is gaining round that the Congress stands to create division amongst Musalmans and what I apprehend is that after a time both will be more united against the Congress than they have ever been before.

Rajendra Prasad added that the Shias were ardent nationalists and that the Shia Political Conference had consistently acted in unison with the Congress. For these reasons, it was imprudent for the ministry to allow anti-Congress sentiments «to grow in an community and more so in a community sympathetically inclined»<sup>62</sup>.

4 – The Shias were few in numbers, not exceeding four per cent in any of the provinces in British India. (Tables 1-2) They were most numerous in Lucknow and the satellite townships, where the *imambaras* and mosques stood as reminders of Shia domination under the Nawabs. Elsewhere in the United Provinces, they were unevenly distributed in Jaunpur where the Sharqis once held sway, in Machhishahar<sup>63</sup>, Bilgram, Allahabad, Jalali in Aligarh district<sup>64</sup>, Jansath in Muzaffarnagar, Moradabad, Amroha, Sambhal Budaun and Rampur<sup>65</sup>. Some influential Shias lived in these areas. The ruler of the Rampur State was a Shia. So was the Raja of Mahmudabad and his kinsmen in Bilehra and Bhatwamau. The Syeds of Jansath and Jalali were Shias. Successful professional men were few, though some like Hamid Ali Khan, a Lucknow lawyer Syed Raza Ali (1882-1949), Syed Ghulam us-Saqlain, Sayed Wazia Hasan and his son, Ali Zahier, Syed Hayder Mahdi, Congressmen and chairman of the Allahabad Improvement Trust, occupied prominent positions in public life. Some achieved fame as writers and poets from the early 1940s, notably Syed Ehtesham Husain of Lucknow, Khwaja Ahmad Abbas (1914-1987), a descendant of Altaf Husain Hali; Syed Sajjad Zahir,

<sup>61</sup> Jawaharlal Nehru to Abul Kalam Azad, 17 April 1939, S. Gopal (ed.), *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru* vol. 9, pp. 334-5.

<sup>62</sup> To Jawaharlal Nehru, 16 May 1939, Valmiki Choudhary (ed.), *Dr Rajendra Prasad: Correspondence and Select Documents*, vol. 3 (Delhi, 1984), p. 77.

<sup>63</sup> «Many of the respectable Mussalmans of Jaunpur and the town Machhishahar belong to this (Shia) denomination». *District Gazetteer* (DG), UP of Agra and Oubh, vol. 28 (Allahabad, 1908), p. 85.

<sup>64</sup> For Syed's of Jalali, see Syed Mohammad Kamaluddin Husain Hamadani, *Siraj-i Munir* (Garhi: Aligarh, 1978).

<sup>65</sup> DG, Muzaffarnagar, vol. 3, pp. 114-15; DG, Sitapur, vol. 11, pp. 105-6.



son of Wazir Hasan and co-founder of the Progressive Writer's Movement; Ali Sardar Jafri of Balrampur State, an Aligarh student expelled from the university in the mid-1930s for his radical activities; and the poet Kaifi Azmi who spent years in Bombay in the company of socialists and communists.

The success story of such men was in no way illustrative of the material prosperity of their Shia brethren, who were much more backward than their Sunni counterparts. Shias were few in the professions and fewer still in trade and commerce. The substantial group of poverty-stricken *wasiqadars* clung to the crumbling remains of their ancestral environs. Most lived in ghettos or in the narrow lanes and alleys of the old city or Lucknow and Allahabad. In 1913, there were 1,661 *wasiqadars* in Lucknow, many of whom dwelt very much in the past. Some held *darbars* at least until the early 1920s<sup>66</sup>. Their condition symbolised the decline of a class which owed its survival to Nawabi patronage. They were unable to make good under the British because they were so poorly equipped to seize the opportunities offered by newly-created administrative and bureaucratic structures. Meston commented that the Shias were «a community backward beyond all normal degrees of backwardness»<sup>67</sup>.

There can be no doubt that Shia-Sunni estrangement was in some ways related to tangible material factors. The decline of the Shia aristocracy in the second-half of the nineteenth-century, the impoverishment of their less privileged brethren and the relative prosperity of some Sunni groups deepened Shia anxieties over their future<sup>68</sup>. They were estranged from a world dominated by the «Other». The British contributed as much in so far as they gave legal definition to Shia-Sunni division and opposition. Banning or approving religious commemorations, arbitrating disputes and regulating religious procession routes transformed latent doctrinal differences into public, political and legal issues<sup>69</sup>. Yet a much more powerful current was at work towards the end of the nineteenth-century. It appeared in the form of religio-revivalism, affecting Hindus and Muslims, Shias and Sunnis, Deobandis and Bareilwis. It threatened to undermine the structure of both inter- as well as intra-community relations. Shia-Sunni schism in Lucknow, notwithstanding its local specificity, needs to be located in the context of such countrywide trends and tendencies.

It is widely known that cow-protection societies, Hindi Pracharni Sabhas and the Arya Samaj movement were designed to hegemonise Hindu society through a

<sup>66</sup> SAROJINI GANJU, 'The Muslims of Lucknow, 1919-39', in K. Ballhatchet and J. Harrison (eds.), *The City in South Asia: Pre-Modern Modern* (London, 1980), p. 286.

<sup>67</sup> UP Government (Education Department), file no. 398, 1926, UPSA.

<sup>68</sup> IMTIAZ AHMAD, 'The Shia-Sunni Dispute in Lucknow', in Milton Israel and N.K. Wagle (eds.), *Islamic Society and Culture: Essays in Honour of Professor Aziz Ahmad* (Delhi, 1983); Ganju, *The Muslims of Lucknow*, cit., pp. 290, 292.

<sup>69</sup> KEITH HJORTSHOJ, 'Shi'i Identity and the significance of Muharram in Lucknow India', in Martin Kramer (ed.), *Shiism: Resistance and Revolution* (London, 1987), p. 291.



set of common cultural and religious paradigms. Similar currents, some in response to the intellectual and cultural hegemony of the West but most in reaction to Hindu revitalisation campaigns, gripped Muslims as well. Towards the end of the nineteenth-century, in particular, the notion of a sharply defined communitarian identity, distinct and separate from others, had acquired much greater legitimacy among the north Indian *ashraf* Muslims. In the political and educational domain, Syed Ahmad Khan plotted his trajectory within a communitarian framework. The Aligarh College, the All-India Muhammadan Educational Conference, the Urdu Defence Associations and the Muslim League had well-defined communitarian goals. They were concerned to create a *Muslim* identity in Indian politics.

Such moves towards political «separatism», exemplified in the activities of Syed Ahmad and Aligarh's «First Generation», were matched by a concerted drive to create an ordered, unified and cohesive *religious* community within the Islamic paradigm. This was the goal of the founders of the *Dar al-'ulum* at Deoband and the *Nadwat al-'ulama'* in Lucknow. The high priests at these institutions asserted their role as interpreters, transmitters and guardians with much greater vigour and consistency. There was much greater confidence in their insistence, through sheafs of *fatawa* (religious decrees), on imposing a moral and religious code consistent with Quranic injunctions and free of accretions and interpolations. Not surprisingly, over 200 books listed in London's India Office Library Catalogue, compiled by J.M. Blumhardt in 1900, dealt with ceremonial religious observances. These included compendium of religious duties, treatises on lawful and unlawful actions and collections on religious precepts. In a nutshell, the growth of the printing press, the proliferation of vernacular newspapers and the expanding educational networks served as powerful instruments for restructuring an *ideal* community that would conform to and reflect the Islamic ethos that prevailed during the days of the Prophet and his successors.

The Islamic resurgence, initially confined to northern India, spread to other areas rapidly. Religious revivalism, conducted under the aegis of the Faraizis, had already swept the rural Muslims in the Bengal countryside. The dominant strain of the Islamization drive was to reject composite and syncretic tendencies and create instead a pan-Islamic or a specifically pan-Indian Muslim identity. Rafiuddin Ahmad has shown how religious preachers prompted the masses to look beyond the borders of Bengal in quest of their supposed Islamic past and attach greater importance to their «Muslim» as opposed to their local or regional identity. This new emphasis proved crucial to the subsequent emergence of a measure of social cohesion in a diversified and even culturally polarised community<sup>70</sup>.

<sup>70</sup> RAFIUDDIN AHMAD, *The Bengali Muslims 1871-1906: A Quest for Identity* (Delhi, 1981), p. 184.

In relation to the Hindus, the «Other», the meaning of being a Muslim was translated through late nineteenth-century religious and political idioms. Shias and Sunnis, on the other hand, discovered new symbols of identification in the form of separate graveyards (*qabristaan*), separate mosques, separate schools, separate religious and charitable endowments<sup>71</sup>. These institutions defined the boundaries within which Shias and Sunnis were required to stay apart. They were to live as separate entities in a world fashioned by the religio-political leadership. Attempts to disturb the *status quo* encountered strong resistance.

Sunni Islam was just as much «corrupted» by the incorporation of Hindu beliefs and customs as by the adoption of Shia practices. So a campaign was mounted at the turn of the nineteenth-century to question shared cultural, religious and intellectual paradigms and revive those controversies that lay dormant for long periods. The *Madh-e Sahaba* processions were, for example, organised with much greater fanfare in Fatehpur, where Maulana Syed Abid Husain first started the practice in 1901, and in Lucknow around 1908-9 with the backing of Maulana Syed Ain ul-Qazat tutor of both the Firangi 'alim Maulana Abdul Bari (1878-1926) and by Maulvi Abd ul-Shakur, one of the chief architects of the Sunni agitation in Lucknow and the *Dar ul-Mubbalighin*<sup>72</sup>.

There was in addition, a concerted move to discourage Shia-Sunni marriages, portray Shias as sexually promiscuous, describe them as heretics and depict them as traitors to the country and as enemies of Islam. Frequently cited examples were Mir Sadiq, *diwan* of Tipu Sultan, Mir Alam, *diwan* of Hyderabad, Mir Jafar, *diwan* of Siraj ud-Daula, or the Bilgrami family. They were chided for being in league with British or Indian governments against their Sunni overlords<sup>73</sup>. «Among the people classed as Muslim», observed Zaraf ul-Mulk,

the Shias and the Ahmadis are the two sects which have basic differences with Muslims and are a constant source of internecine trouble and discord... *It would be a real gain to the health of the body politic of Islam if these two sects were lopped off and treated as separate minorities* (emphasis added)<sup>74</sup>.

Muharram practices were the chief target of attack. The central theme, underlined years later by an 'alim of *Nadwat al-'ulama*' in Lucknow, was the impropriety of giving «vent to one's feeling of sorrow thorough wailings and

<sup>71</sup> As early as 1871, Shias and Sunnis, in separate formal representations, demanded 'distinct and separate burial grounds'. V.T. OLDENBURG, *The Making of Colonial Lucknow, 1856-1877* (Princeton, 1984).

<sup>72</sup> ZAFARUL MULK *Shia-Sunni Dispute*, cit., p. 11.

<sup>73</sup> OMAR KHALIDI, *op. cit.* pp. 39-40.

<sup>74</sup> ZAFARUL MULK *op. cit.*

lamentation» and crying over a past happenig<sup>75</sup>. Around 1933-39, considerable polemical literature surfaced against *azadari*<sup>76</sup>. The Sunni press, in particular, denounced *ta'ziadari* as *bid'at* and *haram*<sup>77</sup>. In February 1939, the *Tabaffuz-i Millat* sought permission to take out small processions to dissuade Sunnis by word of mouth from *ta'ziadari*<sup>78</sup>. Sharar, who bemoaned Shia-Sunni differences, observed how Maulvi Abd ul-Shakoor perfected the art of public debates (*munazirah*) with his Shia counterparts<sup>79</sup>.

The indictment of Muharram rites was by no means a new development; the severity with which it was done in Lucknow during the 1930s was somewhat unusual and had few historical precedences. It is true that orthodox Sunni treatises were critical of and averse to the Shias. In the sixteenth century, Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi, chief exponent of the Naqshbandi *silsilah* in India, began his career by writing a pamphlet against the Shias. Shah Waliullah (1702-1763), one of the foremost original thinkers in the history of Indian Islam, discussed the question whether Shias were *kafirs*, apostates or just immoral. Shah Abd ul-Aziz (1746-1824) wrote a highly polemical book in 1889 to prevent «Sunnis from straying away from their faith in polemics with the Shias». Deoband's *Dar al-'ulum*, inspired by the Waliullah and his disciples, were antithetical to Shia beliefs and practices. Syed Ahmad's invitation to Deoband's founders met with an emphatic refusal: they would not associate with a college that had room for Shias<sup>80</sup>. One of its foremost '*alim*', Husain Ahmad Madani, shared this antipathy of towards the Shias, though he was at the same time a major proponent of secular nationalism. Yet the diktat of an '*alim*' here or a theologian there did not undermine those values and customs that people shared with each other for generations. There were other schools of thought in Sunni Islam which advocated reconciliation and rapprochement. Many of the Shia *mujtahids*, including the renowned Maulvi Dildar Ali, were in fact products of the *Firangi Mahal* in Lucknow. There were other forces at work, especially those linked with Sufi Islam, that cemented unity and integration.

Sectarianism in the 1930s, however, was of a distinct nature. The debates then were no longer restricted to the "Khilafat". Nor were the age old controversies confined to the learned and holy men on both sides. The energy released during the decade, spurred by newly-started organisations wedded to

<sup>75</sup> S. ABUL HASAN ALI NADWI. *The Mussalman* (Lucknow 1974 edn.), p. 65.

<sup>76</sup> See, for example Proscribed Publications (Urdu), 52, 93, 139, IOLR.

<sup>77</sup> SNNR, UP, for the week ending 19 December 1936 and 20 March 1937.

<sup>78</sup> Jasbir Singh to G.M. Harper 10 February 1939 *op. cit.*

<sup>79</sup> SHARAR, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

<sup>80</sup> DAVID LELYVELD, *Aligarh's First Generation: Muslim Solidarity in British India* (Princeton, 1978). p. 134; see also S.A.A. RIZVI *Shah Abd Al-Aziz: Puritanism, Sectarianism, Polemics and Jihad* (Canberra, 1982), p. 256. For Deoband, see B.D. METCALF, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband. 1860-1900* (Princeton, 1982). See also, SHARAR, *op. cit.*, p. 95, for a brief history of public debates in Lucknow.

separate Sunni and Shia world views, substantially altered the structure of social relations. They imposed severe strains on the overall consensus, achieved through long-standing social, cultural and economic networks. People were encouraged to transgress traditional codes of conduct and behaviour and organise themselves as a separate entity in opposition to the «Other». The emotional charge deepened the intensity and depth of sectarian conflicts, competition and rivalries.

The Shias were not far behind in fortifying their claims. They tried, first of all, to rejuvenate their educational institutions which had virtually collapsed in the absence of Nawabi patronage. They regarded the M.A.O. College at Aligarh as a «Sunni» institution, though Syed Ahmad Khan had, in recognition of Shia-Sunni differences, made a provision for teaching Shia theology. They had no theological seminary of their own. And because entry to Deoband or *Nadwa* was restricted to Sunni students, those Shias who aspired to become religious leaders received education not in India but in Iran and Iraq. Thus Syed Abu 'l-Qasim Rizvi (d. 1906) studied in Lucknow and Najaf in Iraq. Back in Lahore, he promoted *Usuli* Shiism in the second-half of the nineteenth-century, founding congregational prayer mosques in the city and in Peshawar further north, having edifices built for commemorating Husain's martyrdom, and establishing an *imami* seminary in Lahore with the backing of Nawab Ali Raza Khan Qizilbash, a wealthy Shia landowner of Iranian origin<sup>81</sup>. Maulana Syed Ali Naqi (1903-1988), a descendant of the learned Ghufanmaab family, also studied in Iraq. He returned to Lucknow in 1932 and founded the *Imamia Mission* and a weekly magazine *Pavam-i Islam*. He wrote over 300 books. Many of his writings in the mid-1930s were in defence of *azadari*<sup>82</sup>.

The establishment of the *Nadwat al-'ulama'* to the founding of a Shia school in Lucknow. The scheme of a Shia college, floated in March 1914, was the brainchild of Fateh Ali Khan Qizilbash (1862-1923), a landowner of Lahore with large estates in eastern U.P. and patronised by Nawab Hamid Ali Khan of Rampur (1875-1930) and the U.P. government. The idea caught on fast. By mid-June 1916, Rs 3,17,410 was raised. And because contributions came mainly from the United Provinces, there were demands to locate the college in the same province. The Syeds of Jansath in Muzaffarnagar district preferred Meerut. So did Rampur's Nawab, though his preference for a city so far removed from his own area of influence is incomprehensible. Some suggested Agra so that students «do not imbibe political ideas in tender age and may cause inconvenience and trouble

<sup>81</sup> See, introduction in J.R.I. Cole and Nikkie R. Keddie (eds.), *Shiism and Social protest* (Yale University Press, 1986), pp. 66-7; COLE, *op. cit.*, pp. 288-9, and FRIETAG, *op. cit.*, p. 263, for the contribution of Maqbul Ahmad in giving impetus to reformist tendencies among Shias.

<sup>82</sup> This information is based on SALAMAT RIZVI, *Sayed al-'ulama': Hayat aur Karnamen* (Lucknow, 1988).

to the government». But most settled for Lucknow, where the college gates were opened in 1917<sup>83</sup>.

Shia societies mushroomed in every quarter of Lucknow, the hub of Shia intellectual and cultural life. Prominent amongst them were the *Madrasat ul-Waizin*, organised on the lines of the Shibli Academy at Azamgarh and funded by the Raja of Mahmudabad; the Imamia Mission, set up by Maulana Ali Naqi; and the Tanzi, ul-Mu'minin, the Shia answer to the *Tahafuzz-i Millat*, which was patronised by affluent manufacturers of tobacco and perfumes like Muhammad Umar and Asghar Ali Mohammad Ali. These bodies were backed by an aggressive Shia-owned press – the *Sarfaraz*, an organ of the Shia Political Conference, *Shia*, published from Lahore, *Asad*, *Nazzara* and the *Akhbar-i Imamia*, published fortnightly<sup>84</sup>.

With developments around the country heading towards greater Hindu-Muslim friction, sectarian competition began to resemble inter-community conflicts. Not surprisingly, the process structuring sectarian conflict paralleled that of Hindu-Muslim friction in other urban centres of the United Provinces. This was, in part, because Sunnis and Shias of Lucknow could draw on the reservoir of experiences and models developed in the subcontinent during that period. That is, the nationwide impetus to define one's community provided material that could be used by both groups of Muslim<sup>85</sup>. Such tendencies were not countered by a parallel ideological crusade, though individuals like Maulana Abul Kalam Azad intervened to cement the divide, heal the wounds and keep the recalcitrant parties in check<sup>86</sup>.

The Congress in the United Provinces grudgingly tried to defuse the mounting sectarian tensions in Lucknow. But once Shia-Sunni riots flared up, its leaders assumed ambivalent positions. Most settled for a «Divide and Rule» policy, doling out concessions first to the Shias and then to Sunnis. This strategy worked for a little while. Shia leaders, having rallied round the Congress in the past, expected to be rewarded for their loyalty. The bulk of Sunni leadership was on the other hand, enthused by Pant's gesture on 30 March 1939. They stayed put in the Congress. But such support, tied to short-term communitarian interests, was rapidly eroded when the Muslim League raised new hopes and expectations in the early 1940s. At the end of the day, the Congress base among the Shias and Sunnis was eroded.

<sup>83</sup> «Establishment of a Shia College at Lucknow», 25 October 1917 UP Government (Education) file no. 398, 1926, UPSA; Fateh Ali Khan to Meston, 21 October 1915, file no. 136/15. Meston Papers. The Raja of Mahmudabad and Syed Wazir Hasan were the only two prominent Shias who were initially opposed to the Shia College. They believed that it would weaken the Aligarh Muslim University movement and accentuate Shia-Sunni differences.

<sup>84</sup> For a summary of «Shia Awakening», see RIZVI, *A Socio-Intellectual History*, cit., chapter 5.

<sup>85</sup> FRIETAG, *op. cit.*, p. 249.

<sup>86</sup> Azad was deputed by the Congress High Command to resolve the impasse. His personal statu-

It turned out that both the context and the reference point of Shia and Sunni leaders was rapidly evacuated by the powerful Muslim League drive for a separate «Muslim nation». The options were suddenly diminished, because the forces of an overriding and hegemonic «Muslim nationalism» subsumed sectarian allegiances. A British official had urged the Shias in 1946 «to sink their fortunes with the Sunnis and be treated as Muslims»<sup>87</sup>. So they did. Once Pakistan's creation became imminent, both Shias and Sunnis buried their hatchet, hitched their fortunes with the Muslim League bandwagon and undertook their long trek towards the promised *dar al-Islam* (land of Islam). They emerged from the ruptures of history to find that strength lies in forging ahead, exploring new choices and options in the future homeland. They were tantalized by a new ideal exemplified by a new leader. The ideological conflicts were, however, carried over to the new nation, where the inconclusive debates resumed with the same intensity and fervour.

On 14 August 1947, Pakistan was born on the principle of Muslim solidarity. But its rationale is tested year after year as Shias and Sunnis continue to fight each other on the streets of Karachi and Lahore. A BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) report in mid-February 1995 showed live pictures of a Sunni leader in the North West Frontier pouring venom against the Shias. A hysterical audience chanted anti-Shia slogans in a country created for Muslims in the name of Islam. A newsagency reported widespread sectarian violence and the arrest of scores of people in Punjab, the chief battleground of warring Shia and Sunni activists<sup>88</sup>. A day later, gunmen burst into two Shia mosques in Karachi and killed 18 men. Women wailed in agony and young men spoke angrily of revenge<sup>89</sup>. Such incidents serve as sharp reminders of the deep fissures that plague Islam in the subcontinent. They are also, some might say, the worst indictment of the «two-nation» theory.

Social scientists need to grasp the implications of these developments in understanding and appreciating the variety and diversity of Islam in the subcontinent.

MUSHRUL HASAN

re aided the process of reconciliation. The Shia *ulama*, in particular, agreed to suspend the *tabarro'* agitation at his instance.

<sup>87</sup> 16 December, L/P&J/8/693.

<sup>88</sup> *Times of India*, 25 February 1995.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 25 February 1995.